The Woman's Sentence

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Abstract

This study sets out to uncover the features of the "woman's sentence" in the contemporary Arabic novel through a descriptive-analytical-statistical study of a complete fictional corpus comprising the novels of four contemporary Egyptian writers: two representing male authors - Bahaa Taher and Khairy Shalaby - and two representing female authors - Radwa Ashour and Miral al-Tahawy. The study traces three principal linguistic phenomena: sentence organisation (by parataxis or hypotaxis), grammatical reference (anaphoric or cataphoric), and ambiguity in both its formal and semantic dimensions. Drawing on a precise statistical count of samples taken from the corpus, the research finds that the woman's sentence in this corpus is marked by a pronounced preference for organisation by parataxis (at a rate roughly 15.8 times that of the men in the sample); that it alone employs cataphoric grammatical reference (referential elasticity); and that it alone - to the exclusion of the man's sentence - exhibits every pattern of formal and semantic ambiguity identified. The man's sentence, by contrast, tended toward organisation by hypotaxis, toward greater syntactic complexity, and toward referential clarity, with no notable exceptions recorded within the corpus under study. The research thus offers empirical, corpus-based support for the claims of Western feminist stylistics (Woolf, Hiatt, Cixous) - claims that had, for the most part, remained impressionistic and unsupported by systematic statistical analysis - by way of a modern Egyptian fictional corpus never previously subjected to a quantitative study of this kind.

Keywords: the woman's sentence; feminist stylistics; parataxis and hypotaxis; anaphoric and cataphoric reference; linguistic ambiguity; feminist linguistics; the contemporary Arabic novel.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the twentieth century, linguistic and stylistic scholarship has not ceased to interrogate the relationship between language and gender. From the moment Virginia Woolf drew attention to the existence of a "psychological sentence" peculiar to the female sex, in her writing on Dorothy Richardson, through the observations of Otto Jespersen, Mary Hiatt, Hélène Cixous, and Christiane Rochefort, the question of whether there exists a "sentence" particular to women that is structurally distinct from the sentence of men has remained a live one in Western linguistic and feminist scholarship. Yet most of these studies remained confined to theorising and personal impression, without being anchored in any specific textual corpus subject to description and quantification. It is from this gap that the significance of the present study arises: it seeks to subject these theoretical claims to a procedural test against a modern Egyptian fictional corpus, thereby furnishing Arabic linguistic scholarship with original material through which the sentence of the male writer may be compared with that of the female writer.

Research Problem and Objectives

The research problem is defined by the following question: *What syntactic and stylistic features distinguish the woman's sentence from the man's sentence in the contemporary Egyptian novel?* A number of objectives branch out from this question, which the research seeks to fulfil, chief among them:

1. To give a precise, textually-evidenced description of the pattern of sentence organisation each sex tends toward in writing (parataxis versus hypotaxis).

2. To uncover the patterns of grammatical reference (anaphoric and cataphoric) and determine the extent of their occurrence in the writing of male and female authors alike.

3. To identify the causes of linguistic ambiguity in the novelistic sentence, in both its formal aspect (pertaining to sentence structure) and its semantic aspect (pertaining to meaning), and to classify these causes.

4. To provide quantitative statistical evidence that either supports or revises the impressionistic judgements advanced by earlier Western feminist studies concerning the woman's sentence.

Research Methodology

The research adopts the **descriptive-analytical method**, proceeding first by giving a precise description of the three linguistic phenomena under study (sentence organisation, reference, and ambiguity) drawn directly from the texts of the corpus itself, and then subjecting these phenomena to a syntactic and semantic analysis that clarifies their operating mechanism and artistic function. This qualitative description and analysis is in turn complemented by a quantitative statistical count of the number of occurrences of each phenomenon for each author individually, together with a calculation of its rate of occurrence relative to the number of works produced by that author — so as to offset the considerable disparity in the sheer volume of novelistic output among the members of the sample (the number of individual works ranging between 11 and 35). The research thus combines precise qualitative description with quantitative statistical documentation, lending its findings a degree of objectivity that goes beyond the personal impression on which many earlier studies have relied.

Research Corpus and Its Scope

The research material consists of the **complete novelistic works** of four contemporary Egyptian writers: two chosen to represent male authors, **Bahaa Taher** and **Khairy Shalaby**, and two to represent female authors, **Radwa Ashour** and **Miral al-Tahawy**. This selection was made in order to achieve the greatest possible degree of artistic parity among the members of the sample: all four writers belong to approximately the same generation of the modern Egyptian novel and share a comparably high artistic and critical standing, attested to by the major literary prizes their work has received. Care was taken to make the corpus comprehensive of everything these writers have published in the way of novelistic work, rather than selective, so as to avoid any bias that might result from confining the study to one or two works from each author's output.

Following this introduction, the research falls into three principal sections. **Section One** deals with sentence organisation in its two types (parataxis and hypotaxis); **Section Two** deals with grammatical reference in its two types (anaphoric and cataphoric); and **Section Three** deals with linguistic ambiguity in its two sources (formal and semantic). The research then concludes with a presentation of its principal findings, followed by a list of the sources and references on which it has drawn.

1. Organisation by Parataxis versus Organisation by Hypotaxis

We have observed that the novelistic discourse representing the material under study - the novels of Bahaa Taher, Khairy Shalaby, Radwa Ashour, and Miral al-Tahawy - is governed by two types of sentence organisation: what is termed organisation by **parataxis** and organisation by **hypotaxis**. Before establishing which of the two is more frequent among men or among women, however, we must first clarify what each type of sentence organisation means.

Parataxis is a word composed of two elements: the Greek prefix *para-*, meaning "beside," and the word *taxis*, meaning "arrangement" or "organisation." *Hypotaxis*, likewise, is composed of the Greek prefix *hypo-*, meaning "under," and the same word *taxis*.[1] The first term, then, denotes a type of organisation carried out between clauses by placing them side by side with no linguistic connective joining them: *clause, clause* [with no connective between them]. Each clause in this type of organisation is independent of the other - it does not depend on what precedes it - as in our saying: "I got out of bed, I went to work." In literary writing, the term *parataxis* is applied - usually - to short sentences arranged with no connectives joining them.

The second term, *hypotaxis*, means making one clause dependent on another by means of a linguistic connective that joins them: *clause after clause* [with a linguistic connective linking them], as in the same example above, but with the verbal connective present: "After I got out of bed, I went to work." Here the connective "after" links the second clause to the first, making it dependent on it, so that its meaning is incomplete without it - and it is precisely this connective that is absent from the first form.[2]

Applying this to the material under study, we find that women make strikingly greater use of the first type, parataxis, while men show markedly less interest in this type of sentence organisation, tending instead toward the second type, hypotaxis. Let us give some examples to show how women use paratactic organisation within their novelistic discourse. Miral al-Tahawy writes in *al-Khibaʾ* [*The Tent*] [T1] (p. 47):

> أسمع تنهدات صوتها تفح بالدموع، أعود لأحتضن وجه صافية الناعس، الحالم بالخفوت، تؤنسني دقات قلبها وأنفاسها الرتيبة، أملّ، أعاود الزحف إلى بسطة الدار، أسمع وقع قدمه، يخرج من حجرتها بلا نعل ولا عقال، أول مرة أرى رأسه المكشوف وجسده النحيل بلا عباءة ولا سروال، أخفت أكثر، يهرول، يفتح الباب، يئز، أسمع مغلاق بابه.

> ***I hear** her voice's sighs hiss with tears, **I return** to embrace Safiya's drowsy face, dreaming of stillness, **her heartbeats and steady breathing soothe** me, **I grow weary**, **I creep back** toward the courtyard, **I hear** the fall of his footsteps, **he comes out** of her room with neither sandal nor headband, **for the first time** I see his bared head and his thin body without cloak or trousers, **I grow more frightened**, **he hurries**, **he opens** the door, **it creaks**, **I hear** the latch of his door fall shut.*

And she writes in *al-Badhinjana al-Zarqaʾ* [*Blue Aubergine*] (p. 148):

> تمرين على الواجهات والأثواب ومحلات الهدايا، قلبان متشابكان من الفضة، إطار يصلح لصورة الزفاف، قلب أخر يصلح لصورة ابنتك التي تحلمين بها.

> ***A walk** past the shop windows, the dresses, the gift shops, **two interlocking hearts** of silver, **a frame** fit for a wedding photograph, **another heart** fit for the photograph of the daughter you dream of.*

As we can see, the clauses in these passages run on with no connective joining them; they are clauses simply set beside one another, carrying us from one image to the next at a rapid pace that results from the absence of verbal connectives between them. Now consider the following:

Radwa Ashour writes in *Atyaf* [*Spectres*] (p. 10):

> تدخل الحمام، تفرك أسنانها، تغسل وجهها، ترتدي زيها المدرسي وتغادر البيت.

> ***She enters** the bathroom, **brushes** her teeth, **washes** her face, **puts on** her school uniform, and leaves the house.*

And she writes in *al-Tantouriyya* [*The Woman from Tantoura*] (p. 73):

> يرفعهما الموج، يغمرهما، يسبحان كأنهما السمك، يتسابقان، يتقافزان، يتشاجران، يعلو صوتهما، ينشر كلامه واضحًا مجلجلًا.

> ***The waves lift** them, **engulf** them, **they swim** as though they were fish, **they race** each other, **leap about**, **quarrel**, **their voices rise**, **his words ring out**, clear and resounding.*

And in the same novel (p. 143):

> تنظر المرأة خلفها، ترى الموج يهدر ويموج، تنظر أمامها، تراه، تنظر عن يمينها وعن يسارها، تتطلع في وجوه أبنائها، تراها واضحة كاملة.

> ***The woman looks*** *behind her,* ***sees*** *the waves roar and surge,* ***looks*** *ahead of her,* ***sees*** *it,* ***looks*** *to her right and to her left,* ***gazes*** *into her children's faces,* ***sees*** *them, clear and whole.*

Women's use of paratactic organisation may extend far enough to dominate entire passages, as we saw in Miral al-Tahawy's *al-Khibaʾ*. Consider the following passage from Radwa Ashour's *Taqarir al-Sayyida Raʾ* [*The Reports of Lady Raʾ*] [T2] (p. 76):

> تطلعت إلى ساعتها، قفزت من مقعدها، سيختل الجدول، سكبت الطعام، جلس الأولاد للغداء، انتهوا من وجبتهم، رفعت رقم 2 الأطباق، قام رقم 1 بغسيلها، سمحت لرقم 4 بأن يقضي نصف ساعة في الرسم قبل البدء في كتابة الواجب، جلست راء لتدريس رقم 3 مادة الحساب، استيقظ رقم 7، أتت به راء وقامت بإرضاعه.

> ***She glanced*** *at her watch,* ***jumped*** *from her seat,* ***the schedule was about to fall into disarray****,* ***she ladled out*** *the food,* ***the children sat down*** *to lunch,* ***they finished*** *their meal,* ***Number 2 cleared*** *the plates,* ***Number 1 washed*** *them,* ***she allowed*** *Number 4 to spend half an hour drawing before starting his homework,* ***Raʾ sat down*** *to teach Number 3 arithmetic,* ***Number 7 woke up****,* ***Raʾ fetched*** *him and nursed him.*

And in the same novel (p. 49):

> جاهدت راء في مواصلة القراءة، غالبها النوم، أطفأت المصباح المجاور لسريرها، نامت. لم يدق جارها باب الغرفة ليسأل إن كان بإمكانه المساعدة، انتبهت راء من نومها مفزوعة إلى حد الخرس، كابوس. مجرد كابوس. همهمت. مسحت العرق عن وجهها، قرأت آية الكرسي، تناولت شربة ماء، عادت للنوم.

> ***Raʾ struggled*** *to keep reading,* ***sleep overcame*** *her,* ***she switched off*** *the lamp beside her bed,* ***she slept****.* ***Her neighbour did not knock*** *on the door to ask whether he could help,* ***Raʾ startled awake*** *from her sleep, frightened into silence,* ***a nightmare****.* ***Just a nightmare****.* ***She murmured****.* ***She wiped*** *the sweat from her face,* ***recited*** *the Throne Verse,* [T3] ***took*** *a sip of water,* ***went back*** *to sleep.*

Yet with women, the phenomenon is not confined to the space of one or two paragraphs; it may extend across an entire page whose clauses are arranged, throughout, in this paratactic fashion. One need only turn to page 112 of *Taqarir al-Sayyida Raʾ* to see this plainly - the page that opens with the following passage:

أمشي في شارع حدرو، أعبر إلى النهر، أحدق في الظلام الخفيف فأرى ماءه شحيحًا، كأنه جدول، له صوت، أنصت، أمر بقنطرة، ألتصق بجانب الطريق ...

> ***I walk** down Hidru Street, **I cross** toward the river, **I stare** into the faint darkness and see that its water runs scant, **as though it were a stream**, **it has a sound**, **I listen**, **I pass** a bridge, **I press close** to the side of the road…*

- And continues in this manner until it closes with the following passage:

أجلس في مقهى، سأطلب عشاء، لا أطلب شيئا، أغادر، أمشي، أدخل مقهى آخر، أغادره، أجلس على مقعد حجري في الشارع، أدخن سيجارة.

> ***I sit** in a café, **I am about to order** dinner, **I order** nothing, **I leave**, **I walk**, **I enter** another café, **I leave** it, **I sit** on a stone bench in the street, **I smoke** a cigarette.*

This extension of paratactic organisation across a full page did not come about by chance: we observed it again in Radwa Ashour's work, this time in her novel *Atyaf* (pp. 29 and 242).

It remains, however, to offer statistics for what women have produced and what men have produced of this type of sentence organisation, rather than a mere handful of examples gathered here and there. Before presenting these statistics, though, it should be understood that we imposed the following condition: for a passage to fall under this organisational type, it must consist of no fewer than four consecutive clauses, provided that no connective links them. Accordingly, wherever four clauses - or more - were found with no linguistic connective between them, those clauses were counted as an instance of parataxis; anything short of that fell below the threshold for inclusion. The results are as follows:

Radwa Ashour used paratactic organisation 151 times across the whole of her novels, at a rate reaching 10 instances per novel; Miral al-Tahawy used it 30 times across the whole of her novels, at a rate exceeding 7 instances per novel. It is worth noting that paratactic organisation occurred in every one of the women's novels without exception — more frequent in some, less frequent in others, but never wholly absent.[3]

Men, by contrast, show a markedly lower use of this type of organisation. Bahaa Taher used it only 4 times, occurring in just two of the eleven novels he produced — meaning

nine of his works contain no instance of it at all. Khairy Shalaby used paratactic organisation 28 times, across 16 of the 35 works making up his share of the research corpus — meaning 19 of the man's works were free of this organisation. Taking the totals for women and for men together, the difference is stark: men used this type of sentence organisation 32 times, at a rate of 0.6 instances per novel, while women used it 181 times, at a rate of 9.5 instances per novel — that is, the women's rate exceeds the men's by a factor of approximately 15.8.

Author	Occurrences of Parataxis	Rate per Novel
Bahaa Taher	4	0.3
Khairy Shalaby	28	0.8
Radwa Ashour	151	10.1
Miral al-Tahawy	30	7.5
Total - Men	**32**	**0.6**
Total - Women	**181**	**9.5**

Figure 1

It remains to understand what an author gains from adopting one type of sentence organisation rather than the other. There is no doubt that paratactic organisation produces a distinctive acoustic rhythm that closely resembles poetic rhythm, particularly that of free verse. Compare Radwa Ashour's line above — "I sit in a café, I am about to order dinner, I order nothing, I leave, I walk, I enter another café" — with the following line, spoken by a poet-character in Khairy Shalaby's novel *Mawwal al-Bayat wa-l-Nawm* [*The Ballad of Sleeplessness and Sleep*][T4] (p. 152), so as to catch the rhythmic affinity between them:

> اخضع، اركع، أولى بك أن تخضع، انظر قدامك خلفك فوقك من تحتك مدفع، لا ترفع رأسك لا ترفع، يقطع.

> *Submit, kneel, better that you submit; look before you, behind you, above you, beneath you — a cannon; do not raise your head, do not raise it — off it comes.*

This line of verse is composed in the *khabab* metre, in which the *mutadārak* metre is compressed (*khabn*) in almost every one of its feet.[T5] Had the imperfect verbs in Radwa's line above been given quiescent endings, it too would have scanned as verse — in the *khabab* metre as well, except for its second clause, which falls into the *mutaqārib* metre.

Beyond the rhythm this type of organisation produces, it carries a further significance connected with the speed of that rhythm. Paratactic organisation compresses events and

narrative time, giving the clauses a rapid pace that results from the elimination of linguistic connectives between them; with those connectives eliminated, we move from one image or scene to the next at great speed, one that leaves the reader breathless. Yet this speed of transition between scenes may generate a kind of **looseness** that can confuse the reader and cause bewilderment, since there is no connective linking cause to effect within paratactic organisation: the scenes are disjointed, held together by nothing. Herein lies the danger - the reader may fail to grasp the relationship between scenes joined by nothing but mere adjacency. When Miral al-Tahawy writes, in *Blue Aubergine*: "A walk past the shop windows… two interlocking hearts of silver, a frame fit for a wedding photograph," then unless the reader realises that these last two clauses depend on the first, he will understand nothing of what the author means: he may fail to grasp that the two hearts and the frame Miral speaks of are what the heroine sees in the glass shop-windows she is passing. If he fails to understand this, he will be confused, unable to grasp the relationship between clauses joined by no connective. Indeed, were we to go beyond what the author wrote and insert verbal connectives between the clauses, the result would come closer to intelligibility than the original wording - compare: "A walk past the shop windows, **where you catch sight of** two interlocking silver hearts **and** a frame fit for a wedding photograph." For this reason - because of the confusion paratactic organisation can cause - hypotactic organisation proved more tightly plotted and more logical, owing to the presence of verbal connectives, and was therefore better suited to novelistic narration, which relies, for the most part, on the element of plot.

Among the further merits of hypotactic organisation is that it is more fluid: one moves from one scene to the next with ease, without being struck by the sense of vertigo that paratactic organisation can induce. Nor does it scatter the mind among events that may, at first glance, appear unrelated; rather, it directs the reader toward a deeper analysis of the relationships between clauses, and allows the writer to throw a spotlight on a clause that may carry more weight than its neighbour, placing that clause first and making the other dependent on it. Here is an example of this type of organisation, in which one may observe its fluidity, its ease of processing, and its linking of cause to effect. Bahaa Taher writes in *Sunset Oasis* (p. 34):

ذهبت إلى الصالة حيث تضع القلل في صينية على إفريز الشباك البحري ورفعت القلة التي تبخرها دائما بالمستكة وتغطيها بمفرش رقيق مخرم والتي يبدو فيها الماء بالفعل أبرد من غيرها. صببت الماء في الكوب النحاسي المزخرف بفروع نباتات ملونة ورجعت إلى الغرفة وفي نيتي أن أداعبها عن هذا الكوب الذي لا تشرب إلا منه لأن أبي أهداه لها ذات يوم.

*I went to the sitting room, **where** she puts the water jars in a tray on the ledge of the north-facing window, **and** I picked up the jar that she always scents with mastic **and** covers with a fine, perforated cloth, **and which** keeps its water genuinely cooler than the rest. I poured the water into the copper cup engraved with branches of coloured plants **and** returned to the room, intending to tease her about this cup she alone drinks from, **because** my father had given it to her as a gift one day.*

Observe this fluidity, the transition from one scene to the next occurring with great smoothness. Had this passage been rendered in paratactic organisation, with no verbal connectives, it would read as follows: "I went to the sitting room, the water jars in a tray on the ledge of the window, I picked up the jar covered with a cloth, I poured the water into the copper cup, I returned to the room." The difference between the two versions is clear: the first flows, its end following naturally from its beginning; the second has scenes that are disjointed for want of connectives.

It remains to acknowledge that paratactic organisation - because it coordinates clauses and gives them **equal weight**, its clauses tending to be very short and joined by no linguistic connective - ensures that its clauses are grammatically less complex than those of hypotactic organisation, since making one clause dependent on another through a connective renders it more complex, an effect compounded by the greater length of its clauses, which tend to run longer than those used in parataxis. Given this, and given that hypotactic organisation is the type adopted by men more than by women, while paratactic organisation is favoured by women rather than men, it follows that the man's sentence is more heavily complex than the woman's sentence, and that women lean toward the grammatically less complex sentence more than men do.

It is only fair to acknowledge that I am not the first researcher to observe that women make greater use of paratactic organisation: Otto Jespersen (Jespersen 1921: 251) and Jennifer Coates (Coates 2013: 18) noted this before us. What we have contributed, however, is the practical, textually-grounded evidence for this claim, which we have supported statistically rather than resting on mere personal impressions.[4]

2. Men, Women, and Grammatical Reference

Reference is one of the devices of textual cohesion.[5] it is of two kinds: the first is **exophoric** reference, the second **endophoric** reference. Exophoric reference occurs when a sentence points to things in the external world, as in the sentence "Look at that thing" - here the sentence refers you to something outside its own bounds. Endophoric reference occurs when the sentence refers you to something within the sentence itself, and is in turn of two kinds: the first is **anaphoric** reference, the second **cataphoric** reference. Anaphora means the use of a verbal marker that point to a word preceding it, as in: "Look at the sun on the horizon - it is setting." Here the pronoun refers back to the word "sun," which came before it. Cataphora is the opposite: it means using a verbal marker that points to a word that comes after it, as in rendering the same sentence a different way: "It is setting - the sun on the horizon."

In truth, the anaphoric marker is easier to process than the cataphoric one, because it presents the subject first and only then refers to it - that is, it refers to something already known, so that grasping what the referring expression means becomes straightforward. When the situation is reversed, and the referring expression precedes its referent, the pronoun - inherently vague in its own basic meaning - comes first, and only afterward does the subject to which it refers appear; this may confuse the reader somewhat, especially if the subject is delayed for a long stretch. The longer the delay in identifying the subject, the greater the confusion and disorientation. Anaphoric reference is accordingly easier to understand, and more fluid and accessible, than the more confusing cataphoric reference - so it is hardly surprising that anaphoric reference is used far more often than cataphoric reference.

Despite this, we found that women make strikingly greater use of cataphoric reference - this despite what we have just established, namely that such reference is uncomfortable for the reader, who must exercise patience to grasp what is meant by a marker that comes before, and precedes, its referent. The following are examples of women's use of this type of reference.

Miral al-Tahawy writes in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 27):

> أفتح بابها ببطء. نائمة؟ ناعسة؟ ناعسة يا أمي؟!

> *I open **her** door slowly. Asleep? Drowsy? Drowsy, **Mother**?!*

The verbal marker in "her door" refers to "the mother," yet the author has given no prior indication that she is heading toward the mother's bedroom door. Thus, when the passage opens with the marker "her door," we cannot know whose door it is until we read on and realise that the pronoun refers to the mother.[T6]

She writes in *Blue Aubergine* (p. 41):

> وحين زرناه في بيته رأيت صورتها على الجدار، كانت جميلة فأحببتها، ونظرت على معصمها حيث يكون النبض رأيت صليبة زرقاء مدقوقة …

> *And when we visited him at his house I saw **her** picture on the wall; she was beautiful, and I loved **her**; and I looked at **her** wrist, where the pulse is, and saw a small blue cross tattooed there…*

At this point we do not yet know whom the author is speaking of: whose picture is she describing? What do these verbal markers refer to? Only after six full lines does the writing dispel this ambiguity and tell us who it was that she loved. She writes: "So the next day I went to school with a white covering on my head, just as I had seen it in the picture of the Virgin." Only now do we learn that she had been speaking of a picture of the Virgin Mary.[T7]

She writes - still speaking of Miral al-Tahawy - in *Brooklyn Heights* (p. 7):

> تراه على خرائط الإنترنت … تراه في عدسة البحث … تراه يتعامد على بروكلين بريدج، ذلك الجسر الممتد الطويل.

> ***She sees it** on internet maps… **She sees it** through the search lens… **She sees it** cutting across Brooklyn Bridge - **that long, stretching bridge**.*

Once again the passage opens with the pronoun - the marker, the referring expression - and only after three lines spent talking about this thing whose nature we do not know does the author tell us it is the Brooklyn Bridge.

Radwa Ashour writes in *Khadija wa-Sawsan* [*Khadija and Sawsan*] (p. 10):

> أبحث عنها بعيني وأنفي أيضًا إذ كانت لها رائحة مميزة، وجدتها فحملتها…

> ***I search for it** with my eyes, and with my nose too, since **it had** a distinctive smell; **I found it** and **picked it up**…*

At this point we do not know what this thing is that she is searching for. But after three lines we discover it: "It was a fairly large handbag." After six markers - pronouns and vague referring particles whose referent we cannot identify - we discover, in the fourth line, that they refer to a handbag.

She writes in *Ghirnata* [*Granada*] (p. 74):

> كاد يدير ظهره ليعود أدراجه حين رآها.
>
> *He nearly turned on his heel to retrace his steps, when **he saw it**.*

At this point we do not know what it was that he saw and that stopped him in his tracks. One's mind might leap to the thought that it was a girl - what else, after all, stops young men in their tracks but girls? Yet six lines later we discover the following: "He picked it up and felt its startled shivering between his arms… the gazelle-fawn." So every pronoun from the first line to the seventh comes to refer back to a gazelle-fawn.

Radwa Ashour can, indeed, push this use of cataphoric reference to an extreme that may leave the reader weary and impatient, owing to the ambiguity and the not knowing what she is talking about. I would go so far as to say that she sometimes opens with a marker and then delays its referent for an entire page - sometimes even more than a page. One need only look, in this connection, at her novel *Qitʿa min Uruba* [*A Piece of Europe*] (p. 123), where the page opens with the referring expression itself: "He visited me in the last week of September 1982; I did not recognise him; he reminded me, and I remembered…" Now, whom is the author speaking of? The reader must wait a full page and more - five paragraphs, twenty-four lines - before learning that it is "Eddie Salih," a childhood friend of the novel's hero.

Men, on the other hand, are never found to use this type of cataphoric reference: across our multiple readings of the corpus, we did not record a single example in the men's writing that could serve as an instance of cataphora. They rely, above all, on anaphoric reference, which places the subject first and only then refers back to it. As one illustration among such references - cited purely by way of example - Khairy Shalaby writes in *Lahs al-ʿAtab* [*Licking the Doorstep*] (p. 22):

> هو أول من اشترى ماكينة للتذرية بدلًا من المذراة اليدوية، هي عبارة عن بضعة مناخل فوق بعضها داخل صندوق خشبي لها حنك مفتوح.

> *He was the first to buy a winnowing machine instead of the hand-winnowing fork; it consists of a few sieves stacked one above the other inside a wooden box with an open mouth.*

As we can see, the pronoun always points back to what came before it: "it" refers to the machine; "one above the other" refers to the sieves, and "its mouth" refers back once more to the machine. The author first identified the subject and only then went on referring to it - the reverse of what Radwa did with her gazelle-fawn, where she referred to it before identifying it. Here is another example from the same author, from his novel *Baghlat al-ʿArsh* [*The Throne's Mule*] (p. 185):

> اقتادني إلى سيارة بيجو ... فتح لي بابها فركبت بجواره.

> *He led me to a Peugeot… he opened **its** door for me and I climbed in beside him.*

Comparing this with Miral's door in *al-Khibaʾ*, we find the situation reversed:

> *Miral: I open **her** door… drowsy, Mother?*
>
> *Khairy: A Peugeot… he opened **its** door for me*

Bahaa Taher writes, in his collection *Dhahabtu ila al-Shallal* [*I Went to the Waterfall*] (p. 90):

> ما أنقذه هو أن السكرتيرة فضلت عليه منحة دراسية ... لا يذكر الآن وجهها وبصعوبة يذكر اسمها ... يعرف أنه وإن سخر من نفسه ومن سنه فهو يجيء الآن كما جاء كل عام لأن صورتها تستدعيه مثلما استدعته من قبل.

> *What saved him was that the secretary had preferred a scholarship to him… he no longer remembers **her** face now, and struggles to remember **her** name… he knows that, however much he may mock himself and his age, he still comes now just as he has come every year, because **her** image summons him just as it summoned him before.*

The pronouns here refer to "the secretary," who had already been named before them. Comparing this with Miral's picture, we find the situation reversed:

> *Miral: I saw **her** picture… the Virgin*
>
> *Bahaa: The secretary… **her** image summons him*

It remains to count the number of these instances of reference among women compared with men, so as to confirm that women - and not men - are distinctively characterised by this type of reference.

Author	Occurrences of Cataphoric Reference	Rate per Novel
Bahaa Taher	0	0
Khairy Shalaby	0	0
Radwa Ashour	7	0.5
Miral al-Tahawy	10	2.5
Total — Men	**0**	**0**
Total — Women	**17**	**0.9**

Figure 2

3. The Man, the Woman, and Ambiguity

We have found that a great many of women's sentences are afflicted by ambiguity, for a number of reasons: some relate to the deep structure particular to the sentence - its meaning - others to its surface structure - its form.

As regards the meaning of the sentence, we may find in women's sentences a word, or more than one, that admits of more than one meaning, causing ambiguity of construction; or such a word may carry an unclear signification; or the ambiguity of meaning may stem from an obscure figurative image - a simile or metaphor - or from that image's excess and its distance from what is familiar and customary; or the ambiguity may afflict the semantic construction without the syntactic construction. It is well known that a sentence has a semantic construction running parallel to its syntactic construction; the syntactic construction of a sentence may be entirely correct, yet ambiguity may still enter through its semantic construction - as in the construction famously cited as a proverbial example of such cases: "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously."[T15] this sentence is grammatically well-formed, yet in truth it is meaningless, despite being composed of words whose individual signification is perfectly clear when taken separately. There must, then, be a semantic construction running parallel to the syntactic construction for a sentence to become intelligible and meaningful.[6]

On the other hand, ambiguity may enter women's sentences from the side of form, whereby a construction acquires more than one meaning as a result of its elastic

grammatical structure; or ambiguity may arise from grammatical inelegance that corrupts the meaning and obscures it for the reader.

The following figure summarises the causes of ambiguity in the woman's sentence:

Ambiguity	**Formal (§3.1)**	3.1.1 Form is elastic and admits more than one meaning
		3.1.2 Grammatical inelegance that corrupts the meaning
	Semantic (§3.2)	3.2.1 A word, or more, with unclear signification
		3.2.2 A word, or more, admitting more than one meaning
		3.2.3 Semantic construction not paralleling syntactic construction
		3.2.4 The figurative image (simile or metaphor) straying from the familiar

Figure 3

3.1 Formal Ambiguity

3.1.1 Elasticity of Form, Such That It Admits More Than One Meaning

Perhaps the most prominent thinker of the modern era to discuss the differences between men and women in literary writing style is Virginia Woolf. At the beginning of the twentieth century she wrote an essay reviewing Dorothy Richardson's novel *Revolving Lights* (1923), in which she described the feminine sentence as being "of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme" and, still speaking of the woman's sentence, as "enveloping the vaguest shapes."[7]

Yet Woolf's own descriptions - "more elastic," "capable of stretching" - are themselves highly ambiguous. She came closer, however, to a more precise assessment of the woman's sentence when reviewing the same author's novel *The Tunnel*. There she quotes a passage of interior dialogue in which the author draws the reader into the character's consciousness: "It is like throwing something away and then returning for it: you know it is there, and although you have moved off, you come back - so I have come back now."[T8] In truth, the relationship between the two pronouns "you" and "I" in this passage is unclear: they may appear to refer to the same person, the speaking protagonist, yet they also draw in the reader - the address is equally capable of being directed at him as well. This referential slippage of pronouns is what Woolf calls "elasticity," and it is what she termed "the psychological sentence of the feminine gender."[8]

This view of women's writing as different from men's writing in this particular respect recurs frequently among French feminist scholars, such as Hélène Cixous (1976) and Luce Irigaray (1985); yet all of their discussions remained confined to the level of theorising, and they rarely gave specific examples.[9] Now is the time to give examples of this type of elasticity in women's writing.

Miral al-Tahawy writes in *Brooklyn Heights* (p. 143):

> الأباريق وحدها لها قضيب ضخم ناتئ تحمله النساء إلى الخلاء ليدسسنه بين الأفخاذ.

> ***The water jugs** alone have **a** thick, protruding **spout**, which the women carry out to the open fields to tuck **it** between their thighs.*

The pronoun in the verb "tuck it" has an elastic signification: it may refer back to "the water jug," yet it also points, covertly, to "the spout," making that the thing tucked between the thighs.[T16] in truth, the pronoun admits of both this meaning and that one. Had the author wished to avoid this ambiguity, she could have resorted to the feminine form of the pronoun in Arabic, so as to agree with the broken plural "water jugs" - had she written "tuck it (fem.)," the ambiguity would have vanished, and the pronoun's reference to the water jugs would have become inevitable. But she did not do so.

Here is another example, from the same novel (p. 91):

> وتشعر أن رجلًا في هذا العالم ما زال يكترث لحضورها كانت هذه هي الحقيقة الوحيدة التي توصلت إليها في النهاية أن تسير، وأن تشعر بأن ثمة من يكترث لوجودك، وأن تشعر بأنك قادر على أن تحب.

> ***And she feels** that a man in this world still cares about **her** presence — **this was the only truth she had** arrived at, in the end: **to walk on**, and to feel that there is someone who cares about **your** existence, and to feel that **you** are capable of loving.*

This pattern closely resembles what Dorothy Richardson did in her *Tunnel*. The pronoun begins in the third person ("her presence," "she had arrived at"), then slips elastically, so that we no longer know who the hidden subject of the verb "to walk on" is - is it "she," or is it "you"? The cause of this elasticity is that the author suddenly turns from the third person to the second person: after "she had arrived at," we are surprised by "your existence - that you feel - that you are capable." Whom, then, is the heroine addressing

with this pronoun - is she speaking to herself, or does she draw the reader in along with her?

She writes in *Blue Aubergine* (p. 116):

> سيفتح لك الباب ويقول لك: انزلي.
>
> ***He will open** the door **for you** and say **to you**: "Get out."*

At this point, the second-person pronoun combined with the future tense suggests that the narrator is addressing her heroine; this reading is supported by clauses that follow this passage, of the type: "your head between your hands, your hands between your legs, in the darkened room." But after a while we find the pronoun stretched to carry two meanings at once: either the narrator continues to address her heroine, or the heroine has stripped herself from herself and begun addressing herself, saying: "But he did not kiss you, and you did not grow angry; you pursed your lips shut as you used to do as a child, and your eyes poured out tears he never saw, and you feigned stubbornness." One might still think the first possibility remains the more likely here too - that the narrator is addressing her heroine - but what are we to say when, ten full pages later, we find her saying the following: "And you came back more defeated still, to sit atop your frustrations, writing things on your papers that are neither stories nor poems - they are only the scratches on your face"? The more likely reading, then, is that the heroine is addressing herself and writing about herself. I say "more likely" only tentatively, since the possibility that it is still the narrator addressing her heroine remains open as well.

Radwa Ashour writes in *Athqal min Radwa* [*Heavier than Radwa*] (p. 127):

> إذ أنهى حكايته بالدعاء عليه لأنه بلا رحمة.
>
> *As **he** ended **his** tale with a curse against **him**, for **he** was without mercy.*

The pronoun in "for he" - does it refer back to the subject, who ended his tale, or to the object, the man he is telling the story about? Is it the subject who is without mercy, in that he curses a man now dead? Or is it the object that was without mercy, before his death?

Compare this with Khairy Shalaby's line in *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets* (p. 105), spoken while talking with a mother who is complaining to him about her daughter - a girl who used to work and support the family but had since run off and taken refuge in a house of ill repute.[T9] He writes:

فطلبت خبرها فجاءت أنها – البنت – تستحق الشفقة.

> *So I asked after her news, and it turned out that she — the girl — deserved pity.*

Notice this explanatory parenthetical, inserted precisely so that the pronoun does not refer back to the mother he is speaking with: Khairy anchors the pronoun with this parenthetical so that it refers to the girl alone, leaving its signification unclouded for the reader.

We return once more to Radwa Ashour, who writes in *al-Tantouriyya* (p. 188):

كيف احتملتُ؟ كيف احتملنا وعشنا وانزلقت شربة الماء من الحلق دون أن نشرق بها أو نختنق.

> *How did I endure? How did **we** endure and **live**, and the sip of water slipped down the throat without **our** choking on it or **suffocating**.*

What does the first-person plural pronoun here mean to convey? Does the author mean by it the heroine herself and her family, who witnessed the massacres in the Palestinian towns? Or does she draw the reader into their number as well - the reader who has also witnessed those massacres until quite recently, indeed still witnesses them, and still lives, endures, and drinks without choking? What confirms the likelihood that the plural pronoun draws the reader in is that this passage is directly followed by the next: "When someone we love dies, we shroud him with mercy and dig deep into the earth; we weep; we know that we bury him so that we may go on living." There is no doubt that the plural pronoun here embraces the reader, since she is speaking of a general human concern.

The question now remains: are men's pronouns simply never afflicted by this elasticity, whereby a pronoun comes to embrace more than one referent? In truth, we found that men, whenever they sensed a pronoun might become subject to such elasticity, forestalled it with a preamble that fixes the pronoun's reference and prevents it from slipping toward anything other than what has been specified for it. Consider the following line from Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis* (p. 147):

أزمتي؟ تسألني كاثرين عن أزمتي؟ أسأل نفسي.

> *My crisis? Catherine is asking me about my crisis? I ask myself.*

The passage is now in the first person; and because the author knows that, after a while, he will shift to the second person, he forestalls the reader's confusion - so that this second-

person address does not slip toward anyone but the self - by first stating: "I ask myself." Thus, when he says, two paragraphs later: "But come now, the time for self-deception is over," we know for certain that the address is directed at the self and includes no other person. Yet he did not go on oscillating between pronouns; on the contrary, he quickly reverted to the first person, saying, immediately after: "What exactly did *I* do in the revolution?" Notice how the explicit "I" fixes the verb-suffix as the first-person subject marker, rather than its identically-spelled counterpart marks the second person[T17] - all of these being devices that forestall the elasticity of the pronoun.

Here is another example of the devices men use to avoid falling into such elasticity. Khairy Shalaby writes in *The Throne's Mule* (p. 205):

> قال ضياء: إن باهر اكتشف من ثاني يوم لزفافه أن كاملة أيوب كانت على علاقة بصديقه مدكور ... لا لم يكن اكتشافا لأنهم – ضياء والصحبة – حاولوا نصحه باللمحات الذكية.

> *Diyaʾ said: Baher discovered, from the second day of his wedding, that Kamila Ayyub had been involved with his friend Madkur… no, it had not really been a discovery, since they - Diyaʾ and the group - had already tried to advise him with knowing hints.*

Notice what Khairy has done to forestall the elasticity of the pronoun: he inserted this explanatory parenthetical clarifying the pronoun ("Diyaʾ and the group") so as to avoid any misunderstanding or ambiguity that might have arisen had the pronoun been left without this clarifying aside. Such clarifying techniques, which forestall ambiguity and elasticity, are indeed common in the writing of Bahaa Taher and Khairy Shalaby. We have accordingly found nothing among the men resembling this elasticity or these referential slippages of pronouns — of the kind that can cause ambiguity in understanding the sentence, as we have seen among the women.

3.1.2 Form Marred by Grammatical Inelegance That Corrupts the Meaning

An instance of this is Miral al-Tahawy's line in *Naqarat al-Zibaʾ* [*Gazelle Tracks*] (p. 48): "تفتح صدرها لتظهر عظمة ناتئة لتكشف نحولها على تلك العظام البارزة" - "*She opens her chest to reveal a protruding bone, to expose her thinness upon those jutting bones*." Here the preposition "upon" [*ʿala*] must be deleted for the Arabic sentence to be rid of its awkwardness.[T10]

She writes in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 43): "والفلاحات جلابيبهن الزاهية يعقدن الطرح السود على جباههن ومن فتحة الصدر تتمايل الضفائر" - "*And the peasant women, their bright cloaks, tie the black veils over their foreheads, and from the opening of the chest the braids sway*." The first clause here is, in truth, extremely awkward in Arabic: a preposition must be added before "their cloaks" [*jalabibihinna*] to yield "with their cloaks" [*bi-jalabibihinna*], so that the verb "tie" can properly take "the peasant women" as its subject.[T11] Likewise, the preposition "from" [*min*] at the start of the second clause is somewhat inelegant; "upon" [*ʿala*] would have been the better choice, since the braids do not sway "from" the opening of the chest but rather sway "upon" it.

Radwa Ashour writes in *al-Rihla* (p. 30): "ولم تكن الأشجار هي العلة وحدها بل كان أنني بدأت آلف المكان" - "*Nor were the trees the cause alone, but rather it was that I had begun to grow accustomed to the place*." The source of the awkwardness here is the elision, in the Arabic, of the predicate noun of *kāna* [the Arabic copula "to be"]: one should say either "rather the reason was [al-sabab] that I" or "the cause was [al-ʿilla] that I."[T12]

In the same novel (p. 92), she writes: "أشهد تساقط الندف الثلجية الناعمة والأرض لا زالت تسكن الأبيض" - "*I watch the soft snowflakes falling, and the earth still dwells in white*." The source of the awkwardness here is the omission, in the Arabic, of the pronoun from the verb "dwells" [*taskunu*]: the correct form would be "dwells it" [*taskunuhu*], or else a preposition should be added to the word "white," with the verb "dwells" cast into the passive voice, giving "is dwelt in by white" [*tuskanu bi-l-abyad*].[T13]

And she writes in *Atyaf* (p. 128): "هل كان دائمًا كذلك أم أن أنني لم أعرفه" - "Was it always thus, or was it that I had never known him." The awkwardness here stems from a superfluous emphatic particle *inna* in the Arabic, which must be deleted, there being nothing to justify its presence.[T14]

Beyond such awkwardness in Arabic, we find this condition extending into the English language as well. Miral al-Tahawy writes, in *Brooklyn Heights* (p. 231):

> *"The table are empty... The dance floor's desetred ... You've the first leson to learnin' the blues"*

Here she is quoting from Frank Sinatra's song "Learnin' the Blues," yet she makes a number of grammatical errors in doing so. In the first clause she rendered the subject in the singular ("the table"), when it should be plural ("tables"), as it appears in the song itself and as indicated by the auxiliary verb "are," which is likewise plural. The second clause is marred by awkwardness where she misspells the word "deserted," placing the letter "t" before the letter "r," rendering the word meaningless. The third clause contains a cluster of errors that entirely distort its meaning: she drops verbs, pronouns, and a preposition, all of which change the sense the songwriter intended. As Miral has written it, the line means: "You have, right now, your first lesson for learning the blues"; the correct form of this line is: "You've had your first lesson in learnin' the blues" - meaning: you have already had your first lesson in learning the blues.

There are, in truth, a great many grammatical and orthographic errors in the women's texts that we have overlooked, on the assumption that they were likely the product of typesetting - this despite the fact that the women's novels were, on the whole, better typeset than the men's, in which latter we found no grammatical error or awkwardness fit to be included here.

3.2 Semantic Ambiguity

3.2.1 The Presence of a Word or More Whose Signification Is Unclear

A word may acquire an unclear signification simply by being obscure, so that we can find no meaning for it at all. An instance of this is Miral al-Tahawy's line in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 146):

> وكشفت أسنانها المقروضة عن وجه امرأة يرعى من جدائلها قاعود صغير.
>
> *And her gnawed teeth bared themselves over the face of a woman, from whose braids a small qaʿud grazed.*

What is a small *qaʿud*? In truth, we do not know. She perhaps meant *al-qaʿūd*, a young riding-camel,[10] but even granting this assumption, the signification remains unclear, because the construction as a whole is exceedingly obscure in meaning: the passage is speaking of a wild doe, and this doe bares her gnawed teeth over the face of a woman, and from this woman's braids a small camel grazes?!

A word may also acquire an unclear signification not because it is itself obscure, but because we cannot tell what the author intends by it. Among pronouns of unclear signification is Miral's line in *Blue Aubergine* (p. 44):

"وجاءت، فعلت الشيء نفسه، لطمتني على وجهي"

"*And she came, did the same thing, slapped me across the face…*"

Who is it that the author is speaking of? In truth, there is neither an anaphoric nor a cataphoric marker to which these pronouns can be referred. It seems most likely that they refer to the school headmistress, since the context offers a few clues that favour this reading: the scene takes place at school, where the heroine is standing watching the boys play basketball, and there is the teacher's visible unease in the presence of this undeclared figure. But all of this remains mere conjecture built on a handful of clues; the ambiguity results from the absence of the subject to which the pronouns refer, which leaves their signification unclear.

Among familiar words whose signification is nonetheless unclear is her line in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 36):

> ويعبئ الغلال صف من البنات الصغيرات، تنتقل (تعني الجدة) باتجاههن وتزفر: اللعنة على وجوه من أنجبكن، فلاحات نجسات قليلات الحياء. تزعق وتنادي: يا نجاسة لمي يدك. يعبئن في الأجولة وأنا أحبو من نافذة إلى نافذة .. تقترب الوجوه ويميل الجسد الرخو، ينحني قليلًا حتى يضع الشارب الكثيف الحمل فوق الرأس.

> *A row of young girls is filling sacks with grain; she [meaning the grandmother] moves toward them, exhaling: "A curse on the faces of those who bore you, filthy peasant women, so lacking in shame." She shrieks and calls out: "You filth, keep your hands to yourself."*[T18] *They fill the sacks while I crawl from window to window… the faces draw near, and the soft body leans in, bending a little until the thick-moustached one sets the load atop the head.*

This passage may seem clear enough, setting aside our failure to understand the grandmother's anger at the peasant girls: we see her cursing them for no evident reason, describing them as shameless, and ordering them to keep their hands to themselves, even though nothing in the scene suggests anything that would call for shame or restraint. We will understand the reason for her anger, however, once we decode the ambiguity that follows the first part of the passage. The passage remains clear until she says "the faces

draw near" - whose faces does she mean? One's mind leaps to the thought that they are the faces of the peasant girls filling the sacks, since nothing suggests otherwise. But who is meant by "the thick-moustached one"? Naturally, this is a reference to men - from which we understand that men had been carrying the sacks (a fact the author has obscured) in order to set them atop the girls' heads, the girls being symbolised by "the soft body" that leans in to bear the sack's weight. From this we understand the reason for the grandmother's anger at these girls: it is the nearness of their faces to the men's faces, and the touching of their hands to the men's hands while the sacks are being loaded. Through this we understand the grandmother's words: "shameless peasant women," "you filth, keep your hands to yourself." The ambiguity, then, results from the fact that the author first speaks of girls filling and carrying sacks, with no men explicitly present in the scene, followed by the grandmother's seemingly unjustified anger, and only then does she gesture toward the presence of the men and the reasons for the grandmother's anger through veiled hints that require prolonged reflection before we can understand them.

Of this same type, too, is Radwa Ashour's line in *Heavier than Radwa* (p. 9):

> كنت بلغت الرابعة والستين حين بدأت الكتابة أعي أن هذه السنوات ستفلت حتمًا من حدودها، لأن أعمارنا كما هو معروف تفيض عن أعمارنا وتقفز بلا استئذان إلى ما قبلها أو ما حولها وتمتد متشعبة في التاريخ والجغرافيا.

> *I had turned sixty-four when I began writing, aware that these years would inevitably slip loose from their bounds, since our ages, as is well known, overflow beyond our ages and leap without permission into what precedes them or what surrounds them, extending in branching fashion across history and geography.*

What are these "years" the author has in mind? Are they the years of an entire lifetime? Or does she mean the four years by which she has surpassed sixty? What does it mean for the years to "slip loose from their bounds"? What are these bounds of the years that she has in mind? She then justifies this slipping-loose by appeal to something supposedly well known - which, in truth, this author does not know - namely that "ages overflow beyond ages." How can this be? How can an age overflow beyond an age? She further says that these years, or ages, "leap without permission into what precedes them" - does the pronoun "them" refer back to "the years" or to "the ages"? And what is it that precedes the years, or precedes the ages? The author then hesitates over this leap into what precedes, adding that the years, or ages, also leap "into what surrounds them" - at which point we

return to a fresh ambiguity: what is it that surrounds an age, or surrounds the years? In truth, however many times we reread the passage above, and however hard we strain to grasp what is meant by it, even if we do arrive at something, this does not negate its profound ambiguity, an ambiguity that stems from the unclear signification of its words.

She writes in her novel *A Piece of Europe* (p. 39):

> تغطي ابنتك باسمًا ثم تأوي إلى فراشك لتجد عيني ذلك القط القابع قريبًا منك وميضًا لا تحتمله يلتمع في الظلام .. لا أحد يموت بالبرد ستقبل الولد ستحب الولد سنة الحياة.

> *You tuck your daughter in, smiling, then take refuge in your bed, to find the eyes of that cat crouching near you, an unbearable glint gleaming in the darkness… no one dies of the cold. You will accept the boy. You will love the boy. Such is the way of life.*

What does that cat point to, or symbolise? Does it point to illness? To death? And who is this "boy" she is speaking of - who is meant by him? There is no anaphoric or cataphoric marker indicating this boy's identity - so who could he be? It should not be understood that he is a son whose birth is awaited, since the hero has no sons, only three daughters. Does the author mean, by him, Mahmoud - a boy, one of the neighbours' children, who will later become the hero's friend? Perhaps - bearing in mind that Mahmoud's character does not appear until the ninth chapter, which comes more than sixty pages after this line!

Miral al-Tahawy writes, in *Brooklyn Heights* (p. 141):

"وتنط لتتفادى المصير الذي تواجهه أمها بعد سكب الزيوت على فخذيها"

"*And she hops to avoid the fate her mother faces after the oils are poured on her thighs.*"

What is this "fate" the author speaks of? The sentence occurs in the context of a young girl playing hopscotch; as for her mother, the subtext suggests that she suffers from sexual frigidity - or, one might say, that she is not skilled at arousing her husband sexually, and so fails to satisfy him, or at least this is how her husband sees her. But what does her mother's fate have to do with what the girl is doing at play? Is the fate the girl is avoiding sexual frigidity itself? Or is it her husband's aversion to her for not knowing what arouses men? But what does any of this have to do with playing hopscotch? Is it because, in hopping, the game requires lifting the dress while spreading the legs apart, so that the girl

becomes an enticing sight for the boys, who consequently spy on her, unconcerned as she is by this? Does the author mean, by all of this, that the girl is learning the art of allure from an early age, so as to avoid her mother's painful fate - the fate she faces every time her husband comes to her, shouting at her: "You're a block of wood, daughter of a dog"? Could this be the meaning the author intended? It may well be.

3.2.2 The Presence of a Word or More That Admits More Than One Meaning

Of this type is Radwa Ashour's line in *A Piece of Europe* (p. 100): " ألمح أولادًا أو بنات من الساكنين فوق السطوح ينزلون السلالم في طريقهم إلى مدارسهم فأفكر في البنات" - "*I catch a glimpse of boys or girls, among those living upstairs, coming down the stairs on their way to school, and I think of the girls*." What does the hero mean by this final word, "the girls"? On the surface, the matter may seem clear: he is thinking of the girls coming down the stairs. But once we learn that the hero had three daughters, and that at the time of this utterance his wife had already left him, leaving him the house and taking the daughters with her, we realise that the word admits of the reading that he is thinking of his own daughters, not the neighbours' daughters - the scene of the girls coming down the stairs becoming merely an image that triggers his memory, calling up the image of his own daughters directly. Which, then, does the author mean - the neighbours' daughters, or his own? In truth, the word, within its linguistic and syntactic context, admits of both meanings.

She writes, in the same novel (p. 152): "سترى شهرزاد وجهها عندما ترى وجهها" - "*You will see Shahrazad's face when you see her face*." Here we find profound ambiguity, the reason being that there are two Shahrazads in the novel - Shahrazad the mother, and Shahrazad the daughter. Which of the two does the author mean? Given this multiplicity of reference for the character's name, the pronoun's reference must necessarily multiply as well, in each of the two instances of the word "her face." To whom does the pronoun refer back - the mother, or the daughter? And in what order? Does the first refer to the daughter and the second to the mother, or the reverse? Or does the pronoun refer to the mother alone? To the daughter alone?

سترى شهرزاد وجهها عندما ترى وجهها

> *You will see Shahrazad's face when you see her face*
>
> *[The Mother — The Daughter]*

3.2.3 Semantic Construction Not Running Parallel to Syntactic Construction

The syntactic construction of a sentence may be found entirely correct, and yet its semantic construction fails to yield a meaning as sound as its grammatical form. An instance of this is Miral's line in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 43):

"والفلاحات ... يجذبن في خيوط القطن وتمر كل واحدة مشوحة بالبذور رءوسهن"

"*And the peasant women… pull at cotton threads, and each one passes, her head daubed with seeds*."

What does this mean? Syntactically, it is correct, but the problem lies in its unintelligible deep structure, which fails to run parallel to its syntactic soundness. What is it that the peasant women pull at within the cotton threads? Were we to invert the word order and say "they pull the cotton within threads," the sentence would gain some meaning, even if it did not thereby shed its awkwardness; and on this latter reading - with the inverted word order - one would in fact expect it to say "they spin the cotton into thread." Now we come to the second clause, which is more obscure still than the first: what does it mean for the peasant woman to pass by with her head daubed in seeds? How can heads be daubed with seeds?!

In truth, this passage from *al-Khibaʾ* combines two faults at once: the first is the grammatical awkwardness at its opening; the second is what we have just established above. Reading it all at once, we can appreciate the sheer volume of ambiguity gathered within it:

"والفلاحات جلابيبهن الزاهية يعقدن الطرح السود على جباههن ومن فتحة الصدر تتمايل الضفائر يجذبن في خيوط القطن وتمر كل واحدة مشوحة بالبذور رؤوسهن"

"*And the peasant women, their bright cloaks, tie the black veils over their foreheads, and from the opening of the chest the braids sway, pull at cotton threads, and each one passes, her head daubed with seeds*."

As we can see, the syntactic construction, from beginning to end, is correct; yet the ambiguity springs from the semantic construction.

Consonant with this type, too, is Radwa Ashour's line in *Heavier than Radwa*: "إن هذه السنوات ستفلت من حدودها لأن أعمارنا تفيض عن أعمارنا وتقفز إلى ما قبلها وما حولها" - "*These years will slip loose from their bounds, because our ages overflow beyond our ages and leap into what precedes them and what surrounds them*" - its syntactic construction is likewise correct, yet its semantic construction is exceedingly obscure.

3.2.4 The Figurative Image - Simile or Metaphor - Straying from the Familiar

A person's recourse to simile signals that they are struggling with an obscure meaning they cannot express outright, and so they resort to simile out of a desire to bring the image closer to the reader. The purpose of simile in general is elucidation - bringing an idea within reach of understanding. The eloquence of a simile arises from its carrying you from a thing itself to something resembling it, on condition that the reader understands the image it is carrying them toward; but if the image it offers is itself obscure, then the simile will fail to perform the function assigned to it.

Consider Radwa Ashour's line in *Heavier than Radwa* (p. 169): "أرى ما أرى فيدخل ما أرى إلى جسم المرأة الستينية المجبول كتربة البلد بالمتراكم من ألف شيء لا تعرف كيف يصير أو يصيرها" - "*I see what I see, and what I see enters the body of the sixty-year-old woman, kneaded like the soil of the country into a heap of a thousand things, not knowing how it becomes, or how it makes her become*." What does this simile mean? The image becomes somewhat clearer if we set aside the preposition attached to the word "heap," yet even so, the image remains obscure, unclear in its signification, despite being a simile - that is, despite its purpose being to clarify an idea. It fails to achieve this; instead, it only deepens the ambiguity. She says that what she sees enters her body, and because the manner of its entry into the body is obscure - as is its effect on her once inside - she resorts to a simile so that we might understand how this entry occurs and what its effect is afterward. Yet what she says is that the entry of the scenes she sees into her body is "like the soil of the country, in the heaping-up of a thousand things"?!

Among these obscure images that stray from the familiar, too, is Miral's line in *al-Khibaʾ* (p. 146):

"وكشفت (الأرنبة) أسنانها المقروضة عن وجه امرأة يرعى من جدائلها قاعود صغير"

"*And [the doe] bared her gnawed teeth over the face of a woman, from whose braids a small camel grazed*."

How can a doe's teeth bare themselves over a woman's face? And granting that they do, what does it mean for this woman - bared by the doe's teeth - to have, grazing from her braids, a small camel?! What does this image mean - "a small camel grazing from her braids"? What is intended by it? What does it signify?

The question now is: do we find any of these examples, or their like, among the men? In truth, we do not. Across the material representing the men - vast as it is - we did not come across a single example that could be classed under any of the branches of ambiguity mentioned above. This confirms that the woman's sentence - as Woolf, Hiatt, Cixous, and other feminist scholars have said - is very often clothed in ambiguity; though these scholars never studied this ambiguity in the systematic manner the present study has undertaken, and they rarely gave examples illustrating what they meant by their theorising. What is striking, however, is that these scholars, across the span of a century, have spoken of the woman's sentence to the neglect of the man's sentence - no one paid the latter any attention. It has been said that this reflects a kind of bias in favour of the female; yet, in truth, we have found no properties peculiar to the man's sentence that would call for its study. We might rather say that the man's sentence is the ordinary, general sentence used by everyone - and so we may echo, with Christiane Rochefort, the words: "Men's writing is writing; women's writing is a woman's writing."[11]

Results

1. Women (Radwa Ashour and Miral al-Tahawy) proved decisively superior to men (Bahaa Taher and Khairy Shalaby) in their use of paratactic sentence organisation: the total number of its occurrences among women reached 181, at a rate of 9.5 per novel, against only 32 occurrences among men, at a rate of 0.6 per novel — a difference approaching a factor of 15.8 in women's favour. Men, by contrast, tended toward hypotactic organisation, which lends their sentences a greater degree of syntactic complexity and logical cohesion between cause and effect.

2. The predominance of paratactic organisation in the woman's sentence gave rise to two concurrent effects: the first rhythmic, in that this type of organisation approaches the cadence of metrical verse; the second semantic, in that the absence of verbal

connectives between paratactically-arranged clauses, while lending them a striking rhythmic speed, also exposed them to a kind of disjointedness and **looseness** capable of confusing the reader and obscuring the relationship between adjacent clauses.

3. Women alone, to the exclusion of men, were found to use cataphoric grammatical reference: the total number of its occurrences among them reached 17 (Radwa Ashour: 7 instances, at a rate of 0.5 per novel; Miral al-Tahawy: 10 instances, at a rate of 2.5 per novel), whereas not a single instance was found in the work of Bahaa Taher or Khairy Shalaby. It was, moreover, observed that men deliberately avoid any potential referential ambiguity through prior groundwork or an explanatory parenthetical that precisely fixes the pronoun's reference.

4. This cataphoric reference reached, in Radwa Ashour's writing, such a degree of extension that the gap separating the referring expression from its referent could span an entire page or more — which makes this referential pattern, in addition to being a consistent quantitative feature, a distinguishing stylistic trait of the woman's sentence under study.

5. The analysis of linguistic ambiguity showed that every pattern of it identified within the corpus - formal (elasticity of pronouns and grammatical inelegance) and semantic alike (multiplicity or absence of signification, the semantic construction's failure to run parallel to the syntactic construction, and the figurative image's - whether simile or metaphor - distance from the familiar) - occurred exclusively in the sentences of the women, with not a single comparable example found in the sentences of the men, despite the sheer breadth of their corpus (46 novels combined).

6. Grammatical inelegance and orthographic errors - including instances arising even in some women's transcription of foreign song lyrics - found no counterpart whatsoever in the men's corpus. The research inclines toward interpreting this within the context of the stylistic differences between the sexes under study, rather than within the context of differences in typesetting or publishing.

7. Taken together, these findings - arrived at through a descriptive-analytical-statistical method - confirm what earlier studies in Western feminist stylistics (Woolf, Hiatt, Cixous, Rochefort) had argued regarding the existence of a distinct feminine sentence, while at the same time moving beyond their impressionistic character to offer

procedural, quantitative support drawn, for the first time, from a modern Arabic fictional corpus.

8. By contrast, the study uncovered no syntactic features peculiar to the man's sentence that would merit being singled out for study - a finding that supports the hypothesis that the man's sentence represents the general, unmarked form of the novelistic sentence, while the woman's sentence stands apart from it as the marked, distinctive form. This calls for further research that would broaden the sample to include other male and female writers from different generations and geographical regions, in order to verify the extent to which these findings can be generalised.

Footnotes

1. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 11th ed. 2005. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.

2. See: MasterClass, "Parataxis vs. Hypotaxis in Literature," last modified November 8, 2020. And see also: YourDictionary, "Parataxis: Definition, Examples, and Why Writers Use It."

3. It is also worth noting that we found this pattern of paratactically-organised clauses in certain works by Western women writers as well, among them the following passage from Hélène Cixous's *La Jeune née* [*The Newly Born Woman*]. She writes: "Alors elle, immobile et apparemment passive, livrée aux regards, qu'elle appelle, qu'elle prend" (p. 237) - "Then she, motionless and seemingly passive, given over to glances, which she summons, which she takes." Here we see clauses arranged paratactically with no connective joining them: we find no main verb, despite the presence of two dependent clauses. Reading these clauses, we may feel meaning slipping from our grasp, or, one might say, feel our patience wearing thin as a result of this disjointedness between the clauses. Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément (1975). *La Jeune née*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions. (Translated as Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément (1986). *The Newly Born Woman*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.)

4. It is also worth noting here that Mary Hiatt found that women's writing, in general, tends toward shorter sentences, presumed to be grammatically less complex than longer ones. When she analysed the logical connectives between sentences (such as "because," "so," "however"), she found that women made less use of these connectives, and of a logical style of writing generally. Yet her observations, too, amounted to no more than a personal impression unsupported by evidence; moreover, she conflated feminist analysis with analysis of the feminine, blurring the distinction between a given author's style, which may be considered *feminist*, and a style followed by a number of women writers, which may be considered *feminine*. If a researcher finds, for instance, that a particular author favours one type of sentence over another, they ought to assume this is merely a stylistic trait of that individual author; but if they find this same style recurring among other women writers, while it is less frequent among their male counterparts, only then are they entitled to regard it as a trait of feminine writing. See: Hiatt, Mary (1977). *The Way Women Write*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University. In Mills (1995: 39).

5. Textual cohesion: a set of devices by which the surface elements of a sentence appear interconnected, signalling states of affairs in which what precedes leads to what follows, such that grammatical interconnection within the sentence is achieved. The devices of textual cohesion are numerous, among them: reference, substitution, and ellipsis. The linking devices that achieve this cohesion are likewise numerous, among them: pronouns, both attached and detached; coordinating particles; demonstratives; and constructions such as "likewise," "except that," "nevertheless," "thus," and so on.

6. See, on this type of ambiguity: Khalil, Hilmi. *al-ʿArabiyya wa-l-Ghumud* [*Arabic and Ambiguity*]. 2nd ed. Alexandria, Egypt: Dar al-Maʿrifa al-Jamiʿiyya, 2013, p. 27.

7. Woolf, Virginia (1990). "Dorothy Richardson and the Women's Sentence." In Cameron, Deborah, ed. *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London: Routledge, p. 72.

8. Woolf, Virginia (1965). *Contemporary Writers*. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 5–204; and in Cameron, D. (1998: 66).

9. See: Mills, Sara. "The Gendered Sentence." In Cameron (1998: 65).

10. *Al-qaʿūd*, among camels, is the young mount that the herdsman rides for any errand. (*Taj al-ʿArus*, 9/51)

11. Rochefort, Christiane (1981). "Are Women Writers Still Monsters?" In E. Marks and I. de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms*. Brighton: Harvester, pp. 179–83. And in Mills (1995: 46).

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Translator's Notes

The following notes have been added by the translator, at points indicated in the text by a superscript "T" plus number, for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Arabic. They are supplementary to, and clearly distinguished from, the author's own footnotes above. Throughout the translation, quoted examples are given first in the original Arabic and then in English translation, since several of the linguistic phenomena under discussion are properties of Arabic grammar and are best verified against the original.

T1. *Al-Khibaʾ* (1996), Miral al-Tahawy's debut novel, was published in English translation as *The Tent* (trans. Anthony Calderbank, Cairo: AUC Press, 1998). *Khibaʾ* denotes a tent or covering - in particular the woven tent-dwelling traditionally used by Bedouin women - and the novel is narrated from within the enclosed world of a Bedouin household.

T2. *Taqarir al-Sayyida Raʾ* has, to our knowledge, no published English translation. "Raʾ" (ر) is simply the name of the Arabic letter R, used here as the narrator-protagonist's initial or pseudonym rather than a full personal name; we have rendered the title descriptively as *The Reports of Lady Raʾ*.

T3. Āyat al-Kursī, "the Throne Verse" (Qurʾan 2:255), is among the most celebrated verses of the Qurʾan and is widely recited by Muslims for protection and reassurance, including before sleep.

T4. A *mawwal* is a traditional genre of improvised, melismatic Arabic vocal folk poetry, often melancholic in tone, which is why we have rendered the title as *The Ballad of Sleeplessness and Sleep*. "Al-bayat" here plays on the verb *bata* ("to spend the night, to lie sleepless"), though it may also faintly evoke *maqam bayati*, one of the principal modes of Arabic music.

T5. Classical Arabic prosody (*al-ʿarud*) scans verse by patterns of long and short syllables rather than by stress, as English metre does. *Al-khabab* (also called *al-mutadārak*) is one of the sixteen canonical metres, capable of a rapid, trotting rhythm; *khabn* is a specific metrical elision that shortens a foot; *al-mutaqārib* is a separate canonical metre. Because ordinary Arabic prose carries short case-ending vowels (*iʿrab*) that are dropped in recitation or when words are given "quiescent" endings, a prose sentence can, under the right conditions, be made to scan as verse simply by suppressing those endings - a phenomenon with no real counterpart in English, where verse and prose are not related by vowel suppression in this way.

T6. In Arabic, possessive and object pronouns are typically not separate words but suffixes attached directly to the noun or verb they modify. "Her door," for instance, is a single word, *bab-ha* (door + her). Because such a pronoun-suffix can be, and often is, the very first meaningful element to appear in a sentence, Arabic allows this kind of forward reference (cataphora) to arise very naturally, simply by beginning a sentence with a noun that already carries an unresolved pronoun suffix.

T7. The reference is to a devotional image of the Virgin Mary of the kind found in Coptic Christian iconography and households in Egypt; the character imitates the Virgin's white head-covering as seen in such an image.

T8. This passage is quoted by our author from Virginia Woolf's review of Dorothy Richardson's *The Tunnel*, cited via Woolf's *Contemporary Writers* (1965). We were not able to independently verify the exact original English wording of this particular passage against the Arabic rendering given in the source text; the translation offered here is accordingly our own rendering of that Arabic paraphrase, intended to preserve the pronominal ambiguity ("you"/"I") that is the entire point of the author's discussion. Readers wishing to consult Richardson's and Woolf's exact original wording are referred to the cited source. (By contrast, the passage quoted two paragraphs above — "of a more elastic fibre than the old…" — has been restored to Woolf's verified original wording from her 1923 review of Richardson's *Revolving Lights*.)

T9. The Arabic reads *khizanat al-bunud*, apparently a reference to a specific institution (of the reformatory or shelter type) whose precise identity we have not been able to verify with confidence; the general sense - that the girl had taken refuge somewhere regarded, in the eyes of the mother telling the story, as disreputable - is clear from context regardless.

T10. Literally, "to expose her thinness upon those jutting bones"; the Arabic preposition *ʿala* ("upon/on") is, in the source author's own grammatical analysis, superfluous here and mars the sentence.

T11. The awkwardness identified by the source author turns on the grammar of the Arabic sentence: "the peasant women" is left without a governing preposition before "their cloaks," so that, strictly parsed,

the verb "tie" is left without a clearly marked subject. This is a point about Arabic case- and preposition-government that does not fully carry over into the English rendering.

T12. In Arabic, the copula "to be" (*kāna*) requires both a subject noun and a predicate noun; the source author's point is that the Arabic sentence elides the predicate noun that would normally follow "was" (e.g., "was [the cause]"), leaving the construction grammatically incomplete in a way not fully visible in English, which does not require an equivalent predicate noun after "was" in quite the same way.

T13. The awkwardness the source author identifies is that the Arabic verb "dwells" (*taskunu*) is left without its expected object pronoun ("dwells in it"), or alternatively should have been rendered as a passive construction ("is dwelt in by white"). This is a point of Arabic verb government with no precise formal counterpart in the English translation.

T14. The source author's point concerns a superfluous instance of the Arabic emphatic particle *inna* ("indeed/verily"), which has no clear grammatical function in this sentence. English has no direct equivalent of *inna*, so this particular awkwardness is not visible in translation.

T15. "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously" is Noam Chomsky's famous 1957 example (from *Syntactic Structures*) of a sentence that is grammatically well-formed yet semantically anomalous; we have used the standard English original here, of which the Arabic in the source text is itself a rendering.

T16. This example turns on Arabic grammatical gender. "The water jugs" (*al-abariq*) is a broken plural, which in Arabic takes feminine-singular grammatical agreement; "spout/protrusion" (*qadib* — a word that also carries a coarse secondary meaning) is grammatically masculine singular. The pronoun suffix on the verb "tuck it" is masculine singular, which agrees strictly with "spout" rather than with "water jugs." In English, which has no grammatical gender, the word "it" does not reproduce this particular ambiguity on its own, since "jugs" is already plural and so could not idiomatically take a singular "it" regardless; the ambiguity the source author describes is thus a feature of the Arabic original that we flag here for clarity rather than one fully re-created by the English pronoun.

T17. This point turns on a feature of unvocalised Arabic script. The first-person-singular past-tense verb suffix and the second-person-masculine-singular suffix are both spelled identically, as a bare *tāʾ* (ت); they are distinguished only by a short vowel mark that is not normally written in ordinary Arabic prose. A form such as *faʿalt* is therefore genuinely ambiguous on the page between "I did" and "you (m.) did" until disambiguated by context — precisely the ambiguity Bahaa Taher forestalls by adding the explicit pronoun "I." English "I did" and "you did" are never ambiguous in writing, so this device is invisible in translation; we note it here for clarity.

T18. Literally "gather/fold your hand" (*lammi yadik*), a scolding idiom directed at a girl or woman perceived as behaving in a familiar or forward manner, roughly equivalent to "keep your hands to yourself" or "mind your conduct."